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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the extent to which cable television diverts audiences from local television news programs, and whether such diversion decreases community involvement and political participation. Of a random sample of 300 adults selected for interviewing from a northern California county telephone directory, 53% reported having cable television. The 136 cable viewers were then asked in multiple response questions which news programs they watched. All respondents were asked to rate their interest in local issues, how informed they were on local issues, their interest in local politics, how often they voted in local elections, their level of community involvement, whether they volunteered in local activities, and the number of community organizations to which they belonged. Twenty-two percent of cable subscribers watched only distant-signal local news programs, 50% watched only local station news programs, and 27% watched both. Results supported the view that cable systems are contributing to the emergence of segmented audiences and a falloff in network audience shares. However, they did not provide much supporting evidence for the link between diversion from local news programs and less community involvement and local political participation. (HTH)

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TELEVISION AUDIENCE EROSION TO CABLE: TO WHAT EFFECT?

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TELEVISION AUDIENCE EROSION TO CABLE: TO WHAT EFFECT?

Abstract

This study examines the threat of distant-signal programming to local television programming and the relationship between television use and community involvement. A significant share of Humboldt County television viewers are diverting to distant-signal local news programs rather than watching the local news programs. This study did not find much supporting evidence for the hypothesized link between diversion from local news programs and less community involvement and local political participation.

TELEVISION AUDIENCE EROSION TO CABLE: TO WHAT EFFECT?

According to Nielsen's latest figures, 29.3 million homes in the United States now have cable television; that represents 35 percent of the estimated 83.8 million homes with television in the U.S.[1] Arbitron's figures, which are consistently lower, show only 30 percent cable penetration.

The number of cable subscribers jumped 26 percent over the past year and a recent Doyle Dane Bernbach study projects dramatic growth for cable television in the next decade: DDB predicts the cable penetration figure to rise to 36.3 million (42 percent) by 198" and 57.3 million (60 percent) by 1990.[2]

One significant reason for the attractiveness of cable television systems is that they provide viewers with offerings not available from local VHF and UHF channels offered over air. (A historical note: in 1960, the average American television household could receive 5.7 television stations; by 1982, that figure had grown to 9.2. If cable is taken into account, the average household has 10.6 channels of video programming to choose from.[3]) And when television viewers have access to programming other than from the three networks, it is a safe prediction that viewers will reduce their viewing of network programming.

Ellen Berland Sachar, a New York media analyst with Goldman Sachs, attributes network audience erosion which is already occurring to several factors: increased channel capacity, apparent audience preference for off-network series, indifference to new entries in prime time on affiliated stations, and pay services.[4] The Doyle Dane Bernbach study cited earlier predicts the fall-off in network shares (audience erosion) will continue: in 1980, the three network audience share was 87 percent; DDB predicts by 1990 it will be 65 percent. DDB also predicts the three network rating, which in 1980 was 51.9 percent, will continue to drop to 43.4 percent.[5]

Diversion from local network stations to programming available on cable systems obviously would reduce local station advertising revenues due to smaller audience shares. Many stations are implementing new marketing programs in attempts to hold their own against high cable penetration.[6] The research literature suggests, however, that the consequences of the introduction of cable television systems into a community may not be only economic in nature.

Consider the possibility of diversion from selected program offerings on local VHF and UHF channels -- in particular, diversion from the local evening news programs. Before the introduction of cable, the television viewer had little to choose from at 6 p.m. except local news programs and public television offerings.

After being hooked up to a cable system, the television viewer has a smorgasbord of choices besides local news programs: nationally originated cable news, distant-signal local news programs, cable entertainment offerings and pay services.

Research evidence of audience erosion for local news programs

after the introduction of cable systems shows that local-news watching dropped after the introduction of cable, as well as watching of all public affairs programming.[7] Hill and Dyer also found that, of those cable viewers who watched any local news, about 30 percent opted for a distant-signal local news program.[8]

Therefore, if diversion from local television news programs occurs, to what effect? Television viewing has been linked to increased awareness of candidates, public officials, issues and public politics, as well as political efficacy and political activity.[9] Since local news programs provides most of that type of content on television, it is logical to predict that cable viewers diverted from local news will lag behind non-diverters in knowledge about such content and in political participation. Indeed, Hill and Dyer found diverters lagged behind non-diverters in ability to name the local mayor (difference not statistically significant) and in having voted in the most recent local election ($p < .05$).[10] This evidence led to a replication study of the general hypothesis that diversion of cable viewers from local news programming will decrease their community involvement and local political participation.

METHODOLOGY:

To investigate the extent of cable-related diversion from local television news programs and the predicted link to decreased community involvement and political participation, data were collected from a random sample of residents of Humboldt County in March, 1982. This area, 270 miles north of San Francisco, has two local network stations which provide half-hour local news broadcasts

at 6 and 11 p.m. (P.S.T.) and one public television station. The county cable systems provide additional access to distant-signal local news programs from two San Francisco stations and one station from Redding, Calif., as well as other entertainment content and pay services. Importantly, non-subscribers cannot receive any of these distant-signal stations over air.

The random sample of 300 adults was selected from the county telephone directory because the low, widespread population of this large county makes random-digit dialing unfeasible. All respondents were interviewed whether they had cable television systems or not. The interviews were conducted by trained student interviewers Monday through Thursday from 5 to 9 p.m. There was a 23 percent refusal rate.

Hill and Dyer suggested that broader, more sensitive measures of local civic knowledge and participation be used in any follow-up of their study.[11] In their study of only subscribers to cable television, "diverters" were operationalized as respondents who had watched any distant-signal local news program during the evening of the previous day. If respondents had watched a local station news program, they were identified as "non-diverters." Those who had not watched any local news were "non-watchers." Respondents were then asked if they could name the local mayor and if they had voted in the most recent local election.

This study uses several measures of community involvement and local political participation used in studies of newspaper use and community ties.[12] If respondents had cable, they were asked how often they watched the news each week and which news program(s) they watched. All respondents were asked to rate: their interest in

in local issues, how informed they were on local issues, their interest in local politics, how often they voted in local elections, their level of community involvement, whether they volunteered in local activities, and the number of community organizations to which they belonged. Respondents were also asked whether they planned on living in the area one year and five years from now. Demographic data on age, education and income were also collected along with preferred sources of information on local issues.

HYPOTHESES:

The specific hypotheses tested include:

H. 1: Cable viewers will divert from local news programming to distant-signal local news programming.

H. 2: Diverters will report a lower frequency of watching news programs per week than non-diverters.

H. 3: Diverters will report significantly less interest in local issues than non-diverters.

H. 4: Diverters will rank themselves as significantly less informed on local issues than non-diverters.

H. 5: Diverters will report significantly less interest in local politics than non-diverters.

H. 6: Diverters will report voting less frequently in local elections than non-diverters.

H. 7: Diverters will report significantly less community involvement than non-diverters.

H. 8: Diverters will report significantly fewer organizations to which they belong than non-diverters.

H. 9: Diverters will report significantly less volunteering in the community than non-diverters.

H. 10: Diverters will be significantly less likely to expect to be living in their community next year than non-diverters.

H. 11: Diverters will be significantly less likely to expect to be living in their community in five years than non-diverters.

RESULTS:

In this sample of 300 Humboldt County residents, 53 percent of the respondents reported having cable television. Cable viewers were then asked in a multiple-response question which news programs they watched. Distant-signal local news programs were mentioned in a significant share (41.8 percent) of the responses (Table 1), which supports Hyp. 1. Of the 136 cable viewers who watched television news, 22.8 percent watched only distant-signal local news programs; 50.0 percent watched only local-station news programs; and 27.2 percent watched both. Non-cable subscribers were unable, of course, to receive distant-signal stations over air.

--- insert Table 1 about here ---

"Diverters" were operationalized in two ways to test the remaining hypotheses. First, all respondents who were cable subscribers were operationalized as diverters, given the likelihood that some cable viewers would watch programming other than local news at 6 p.m. Non-cable subscribers were operationalized as non-diverters. Cable subscribers and non-subscribers were found to be similar in age, income and education. Both groups also reported similar preferred-sources of information on local issues (Table 2). Hypothesis two was not tested due to no data for non-subscribers.--- insert Table 2 about here ---

In this first analysis, diverters (cable subscribers) differed significantly from non-diverters (non-subscribers) in lower frequency of voting in local elections (Hyp. 6) ($p < .02$) and in lower personal involvement with the local community (Hyp. 7) ($p < .02$) (Table 3). These differences disappeared, however, when interest in local politics was controlled for.

--- insert Table 3 about here ---

Since cable television viewers were asked how often they watched the evening news, it was possible to examine the assumed relationship between watching television news and the variables measuring community involvement and local political participation. As Table 4 shows, among the subsample of cable subscribers, watching news programs is significantly related to four out of six of these variables: interest in local issues ($p < .02$), how informed respondents rated themselves on local issues ($p < .03$), how often they voted in local elections ($p < .01$), and their reported level of community involvement ($p < .04$). This evidence supports the assumed relationship between local news program content and community involvement and local political participation.

--- insert Table 4 about here ---

In a second, more rigorous test of diversion effects, those respondents who reported watching only distant-signal local news programs were operationalized as diverters, while those respondents who watched only the two local news programs were operationalized as non-diverters. (This did result in small N-sizes, however.) Diverters and non-diverters were found to be similar in age, income and education, but diverters were less likely to use television as a source of information on local issues (Table 5).

--- insert Table 5 about here ---

Diverters to distant-signal local news programs were less likely to watch news programs each week (Hyp. 2) ($p < .09$) and to be interested in local politics (Hyp. 4) ($p < .08$). The difference in interest in local politics disappeared, however, when the frequency of watching news programs was controlled for. Diverters were also less likely to expect to be living in Humboldt County in five

years (Hyp. 11) ($p < .02$) (Table 6).

--- insert Table 6 about here ---

DISCUSSION:

The introduction of cable systems clearly is contributing to the emergence of segmented audiences and a fall-off in network audience shares. Much of the decline is due to viewer erosion to distant-signal stations, non-network entertainment and pay services.[13]

Audience erosion to distant-signal stations caused by cable television is especially a threat to local television journalism, according to the findings of this research. A significant share of Humboldt County cable subscribers diverted to distant-signal local news programs rather than watch the local news programs. Additional cable viewers no doubt were watching non-news content rather than local news programs.

Why do cable subscribers divert to distant-signal local news programs? It is possible that they may prefer the more expensively produced and perhaps more entertaining distant-signal local news programs from the Bay area to the Humboldt County-oriented local news programs. Perhaps the low-budget equipment and the entry-level skills and ever-changing faces of Humboldt County local news program personnel may be contributing factors. The evidence that persons who did not expect to be living in Humboldt County in five years were more likely to be diverters also suggests that persons who are highly mobile or who lack long-term commitment to a community may be less interested in local news programs.

Since it is unlikely that there is much room for additional television viewing, local television stations are going to have to use research and specialized programming -- especially local sports

and local news -- to differentiate themselves in the market, according to Jack Trout, president of Trout and Ries Advertising.[14] Coverage of local news is something to which local stations are uniquely well-suited, and which should provide one of their best defenses against viewer diversion.[15] As a result, many station and group owners already are improving their local news operations and increasing the amount of time for local news and offering it at expanded times. This is occurring, however, at the same time as cable systems are expanding into offering of local news programs.[16] (Frank Magid, of Magid and Associates, estimates the total number of hours of televised news each week has doubled in the past year.[17]) In addition, Jack Bowen of McHugh and Hoffman predicts different types of newscasts at different hours will appear -- 5 o'clock newscasts tailored to blue-collar workers and late-evening newscasts prepared with white-collar workers in mind.[18] Only time and further audience-erosion research will reveal whether such efforts in local television journalism will make a difference.

As for the hypothesized link between diversion from local news programs and less community involvement and local political participation, this research did not find much supporting evidence. It is possible that the hypothesized link is more complex than envisioned or it may not exist at all. Since cable systems have not been available in Humboldt County for very long, it is possible that may be an important factor to consider. The small N-size of the subsamples may also have masked the hypothesized relationship in the statistical analysis. Additional research will be necessary to clarify and re-test the general hypothesis.

TABLE 1: Evening Local News Progam Watched By Cable Viewers. *

NEWS PROGRAM:	(f)	(%)
San Francisco KRON	51	23.2
San Francisco KPIX	26	11.8
Redding KRCR	15	6.8
Eureka KIEM	66	30.0
Eureka KVIQ	62	28.2
	220	100.0

*Multiple-response item.

TABLE 2: Sources of Information About Local Issues For Cable Television Subscribers and Non-Subscribers.*

SOURCES:	CABLE (f)	CABLE (%)	NON-CABLE (f)	NON-CABLE (%)
Newspaper	111	34.2	89	33.3
Television	94	29.0	70	26.2
Radio	51	15.7	50	18.7
Interpersonal	66	20.3	51	19.1
Other	3	0.9	7	2.6
	324	100.0	267	100.0

*Multiple-response item.

TABLE 3: Community and Political Involvement By Cable Viewers and Non-Cable Viewers.

	CHI SQUARE
Interest in local issues (INTISSUE)	p= .170
Informed on local issues (INFOISSUE)	p= .715
Interest in local politics (INTPOL)	p= .372
Vote in local elections (OFTVOTE)	p= .020
Level of community involvement (INVOLVE)	p= .027
Community organization membership ORGANIZ)	p= .517

TABLE 4: Relationship Between Watching News and Community and Political Involvement.

	OFTNEWS	INTISSUE	INFOISSUE	OFTVOTE	INVOLVE	ORGANIZ	INTPOL
Frequency of watching news (OFTNEWS)	***	.155 p= .026	.148 p= .032	.184 p= .010	.138 p= .042	.073 p= .181	.023 p= .389
Interest in local issues (INTISSUE)		***	.384 p= .001	.365 p= .001	.252 p= .001	.062 p= .001	.437 p= .001
Informed on local issues (INFOISSUE)			***	.326 p= .001	.310 p= .001	.124 p= .063	.314 p= .001
Vote in local elections (OFTVOTE)				***	.216 p= .003	.109 p= .090	.372 p=.001
Level of community involvement (INVOLVE)					***	.293 p= .001	.229 p= .001
Community organization membership (ORGANIZ)						***	.226 p= .003
Interest in local politics (INTPOL)							***

TABLE 5: Sources of Information About Local Issues For Diverters to Distant-Signal Local News and Non-Diverters.**

	DIVERTERS (f)	DIVERTERS (%)	Non-DIVERTERS (f)	Non-DIVERTERS (%)
SOURCES:				
Newspaper	21	38.8	47	32.1
Television	11	20.3*	48	32.8*
Radio	10	18.5	24	16.4
Interpersonal	11	20.3	26	17.8
Other	1	1.8	1	0.6
	54	100.0	146	100.0

*
$p < .05$

**
Multiple-response item.

TABLE 6: Differences in Levels of Community and Political Involvement By Diverters To Distant-Signal Local News and Non-Diverters.

	CHI SQUARE
Frequency of watching news (OFTNEWS)	p= .094
Interest in local issues (INTISSUE)	p= .517
Informed on local issues (INFOISSUE)	p= .789
Interest in local politics (INTPOL)	p= .081
Vote in local elections (OFTVOTE)	p= .858
Level of community involvement (INVOLVE)	p= .450
Community organization membership (ORGANIZ)	p= .848
Live here next year (LIVENEXT)	p= .756
Live here in five years (LIVEFIVE)	p= .020

FOOTNOTES:

1 "Neilsen charts cable universe at 35% penetration," Broadcasting, Jan. 10, 1983, pp. 92-93.

2 "DDB's media horoscope," Broadcasting, April 5, 1982, p. 142.

3 "Neilsen sees bright future for audience measurement," Broadcasting, Sept. 20, 1982, p. 62.

4 "'Healthy' conventional TV industry approaching $17 billion: TVB," Broadcasting, Nov. 22, 1982, pp. 28-29.

5. Broadcasting, April 5, 1982, op. cit.

6 Broadcasting, Nov. 22, 1982, op. cit.

7 Leo W. Jeffres, "Cable TV and Interest Maximization," Journalism Quarterly, 55: 149-154 (Spring, 1978).

8 David B. Hill and James A. Dyer, "Extent of Diversion to Newscasts from Distant Signal Stations by Cable Viewers," Journalism Quarterly, 58: 552-555 (Winter, 1981).

9 Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, The Unseeing Eye (New York: Putnam, 1976); Thomas E. Patterson, The Mass Media Election (New York: Praeger, 1980); Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail, "The Effects of Television and Other Media," in Trenaman and McQuail (eds.), Television and the Political Image (London: Methuen); Per Torsvik, "Television and Information," Scandinavian Political Studies, 7: 215-239 (1972); S. William Alper and Thomas R. Leidy, "The Impact of Information Transmission Through Television," Public Opinion Quarterly, 33: 556-562 (1970); Philip Palmgreen, "Mass Media Use and Political Knowledge," Journalism Monographs, No. 61 (1979); Phillip J. Tichenor and Daniel B. Wackman, "Mass Media and Community Public Opinion," American Behavioral Scientist, 16: 593-606 (1973); John P. Robinson, "Mass Communication and Information Diffusion," in F. G. Kline and P. J. Tichenor (eds.) Current Perspectives in Mass Communications Research (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1972); Jay G. Blumler and Denis McQuail, Television and Politics: Its Uses and Influence (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969); Robert

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H. Prisuta, "Mass Media Exposure and Political Behavior," Educational Broadcasting Review, 7: 167-173 (1973); Garret J. O'Keefe, "Political Malaise and Reliance on Media," Journalism Quarterly, 57: 122-128 (Spring, 1980); M. Mark Miller and Stephen D. Reese, "Media Dependency as Interaction: The Effects of Exposure and Reliance on Political Efficacy and Activity." Unpublished report prepared for presentation to Association for Education in Journalism, Boston, August 1980.

10 Hill and Dyer, op. cit.

11 Hill and Dyer, op. cit.

12 Robert L Stevenson, "Newspaper Readership and Community Ties," A.N.P.A. News Research Report No. 18, March 9, 1979.

13 Broadcasting, Nov. 22, 1982, op. cit.

14 Broadcasting, Nov. 22, 1982, op. cit.

15 "Consultants and critics critique local journalism," Broadcasting, July 26, 1982, pp. 46, 50, 52.

16 "Cable systems begin to get into the local news act," Broadcasting, July 26, 1982, pp. 42, 46; Laurence Zuckerman, "Cable news hits the small time," Columbia Journalism Review, September/October 1982, pp. 35-38.

17 Broadcasting, July 26, 1982, op. cit.

18 Broadcasting, July 26, 1982, op. cit.

See also: G. L. Grotta and D. Newsom, "How Does Cable Television in the Home Relate to Other Media Use Patterns?" Journalism Quarterly Vol. 59, No. 4 Winter 1982.